

# Edgar Allan Poe

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## *Science Fiction Pioneer!*



Steamships and locomotives, electric telegraphic messages and true image daguerreotypes--these were sign posts to an age when scientific possibilities and human progress seemed limitless.

Marvelous scientific discoveries and amazing technological inventions sparked the imagination of 19th century writers. A new literary genre arose as writers grappled with the ideas and points of view of a fast changing society.

Edgar Allan Poe, ever attentive to the temper of his times, capitalized on his readers fascination, and at times gullibility, with tales of fantastic balloon voyages, feats of mesmerism, and the nature and origin of the universe.

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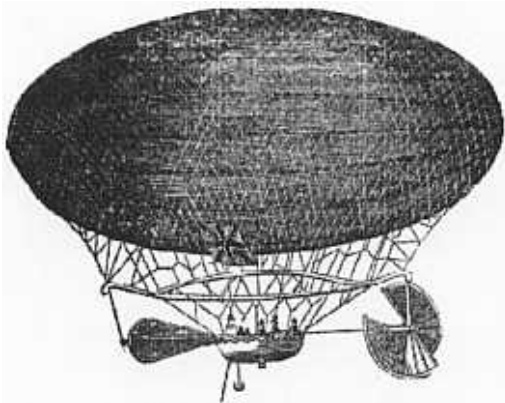
## *"these things are in the future"*

Mankind's imagination soared with the first balloon flight. Poe featured balloon flights in some of his most imaginative tales.

In "The Unparalleled Adventures of One Hans Pfaal" Poe tells a story of an impoverished bellows mender who escapes his creditors by building a balloon and flying to the moon.

In "Mellonta Tauta" (translated as "these things are in the future"), Poe satirized 19th century society from the viewpoint of a balloonist in the year 2848.

### THE MODEL.



### OF THE VICTORIA.

Woodcut by unknown artist for "The Balloon Hoax" in the *New York Sun*, April 13, 1844.

Courtesy of Free Library of Philadelphia, Gimble Collection

In 1844, the *New York Sun* newspaper played a hoax on its readers by presenting as a true event, Poe's tall-tale of a "Steering Balloon" crossing the Atlantic Ocean in the "incredibly brief period of Three Days." The article announced:

*"The great problem is at length solved! The air, as well as the earth and the ocean, has been subdued by science, and will become a common and convenient highway for mankind."*

## *Pseudo Sciences...*

Along with other new scientific theories, mesmerism excited the imagination of the public. Mesmerism, or hypnosis, was used by the physician F. A. Mesmer (1734-1815) in the treatment of his patients.

In "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" Poe created a tale of a man placed in a mesmeric trance during the throes of death. The story was written so realistically that many readers were not sure whether it was fiction or not. When a reader asked Poe if the story was a hoax, he playfully replied, "*Hoax' is precisely the word suited to M. Valdemar's case...Some few persons believe it--but I do not--and don't you.*"



"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"  
Illustration by Ernest Wallcousins (1935)

Although fascinated with the advances in science and technology, Poe was doubtful of humanity's progress via science. In a letter he responded to a friend's assertion of mankind's advancement towards perfection: "*Man is now only more active, not wiser, nor more happy than he was 6000 years ago.*"

Poe especially did not want creative intuition sacrificed in the name of scientific reasoning. He believed truly creative scientific thinking required the intuitive imagination of a poet. In 1829, he wrote "Sonnet--To Science."

### SONNET--TO SCIENCE

Science! True daughter of Old time thou art!  
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.  
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are dull realities?  
How should he love thee? or how deem thee wise,  
Who wouldst not leave him in his wandering  
To seek for treasure in the jewelled skies,  
Albeit he soared with an undaunted wing?  
Hast thou not dragged Diana from her car?  
And driven the Hamadryad from the wood  
To seek a shelter in some happier star?  
Hast thou not torn the Naiad from her flood,  
The Elfin from the green grass, and from me  
The summer dream beneath the tamarind tree?

Poe's "Eureka: A Prose Poem" was published in the summer of 1848. Poe felt he had offered a logical explanation of the creation and nature of the universe which "...would revolutionize the world of Physical & Metaphysical Science."

A year later while suffering a severe bout of cholera, Poe wrote in despair to his mother-in-law, "*I have no desire to live since I have done 'Eureka.' I could accomplish nothing more.*"

Despite his ambivalence towards science, Poe's pioneering experimentation with

the themes of space and time travel, scientific discoveries, and man's relationship to the universe clearly established him as one of the earliest science fiction writers. Later, these themes would be explored by famous science fiction writers, such as Jules Verne, Arthur C. Clarke, and Isaac Asimov.